

## LAVACA NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY

The Lavaca Neighborhood is one of the oldest remaining intact residential areas in San Antonio. The boundaries of the existing neighborhood are generally:

Durango Boulevard, *to the north*  
S. St. Mary's Street, *to the west*  
IH-37, *to the east, and*  
Missouri-Kansas Railroad Line, *to the south.*

Beginning in the early 1870s, vernacular houses, built primarily by working class families, began to define the Lavaca Neighborhood. This was approximately the same time that the affluent San Antonians were building much larger homes several blocks away in the King William neighborhood. Lavaca Neighborhood's original residents included carpenters, stonemasons, shopkeepers, clerks, tailors, bartenders, teamsters and butchers.

The area was originally part of the Labor de Afuera, the farmlands of Mission San Antonio de Valero (the Alamo) which were watered by the Acequia Madre, an 18<sup>th</sup> century irrigation ditch built by the Spanish. The mission lands were subdivided into suertes (arbitrary division of land based on a lottery system) in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and individuals owned the property. By the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century, land speculators, including Thomas J. Define and Sam Maverick, had purchased large tracts in the Lavaca area.

When the Augustus Koch Bird's Eye View map of San Antonio was published in 1873, development in the Lavaca neighborhood was well underway, with construction along Lavaca and Barrera Streets. The later 1886 Bird's Eye View map documents further development in the area. Subdivisions of land made in 1877 on Barrera and Camargo Streets, and in 1888 on Callaghan Avenue, indicate the area's ongoing development. In the 1890s, Robert and Sarah Eager and William Leigh subdivided land south of Callaghan Avenue and along Leigh Street. Along the western boundary of the neighborhood on South Alamo Street, a firehouse, meat markets and beer gardens stood alongside residences. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, one and two story commercial buildings were constructed.

The first City Directory for San Antonio was published in 1877, and at that time, Lavaca Street

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residents included families with German, Polish, and Hispanic surnames. Of those listed, Germans were by far the predominant group. African Americans also resided in the area, primarily at the eastern end of the neighborhood that came to be known as Baptist Settlement, named for the New Light and Mount Zion Baptists churches, both founded there. In 1941, the housing in that portion of the neighborhood was razed for construction of the Victoria Courts public housing project.

In the past decades, the Lavaca neighborhood has experienced many changes. The housing stock, for the most part, has remained intact with a large percentage of the homes being handed down through the generations. This has contributed to the longstanding social stability within the neighborhood. However, the socioeconomic climate has prevented the comprehensive rehabilitation efforts found just across S. St. Mary's Street, in the King William neighborhood, and the lack of any formal historic designation has allowed the neighborhood to approach rehabilitation efforts in a haphazard manner. The general "small-scale" housing type and lack of general services in the area have provided some degree of protection from escalating property values and "gentrification."

In the past several years, the profile of the new Lavaca resident has begun to change. Many individuals and families from outside San Antonio have moved into the neighborhood, finding its affordability, convenience to downtown and historic quality an ideal setting for living. In addition, there have been former neighborhood residents who moved to other locations within San Antonio, and have returned to Lavaca to spend their retirement years.

With the recent decision to demolish the Victoria Courts public housing site, the neighborhood citizens rallied to effect a positive change for the new development. They voiced their opinions against large-scale commercial interests being developed on the site, and argued that mixed income housing with neighborhood-scale services was appropriate as an integrated development solution adjacent to the existing Lavaca neighborhood. Without the barrier of the more traditionally expected "not in my backyard" syndrome to contend with, the Lavaca neighborhood stands poised to set the stage for a modern day San Antonio model of a successful, mixed income hous-

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